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Support Staff

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## I Prefer To Be a “Paraprofessional” Instead of a “Librarian”

By **Foster Bunday**

That comment at the start of an e-mail sparked this article. Why this preference? Why not “go for it?”

As a teen I took many aptitude tests and was always told, “You can do any thing you want!” In other words, the tests indicated that I could be a “jack-of-all-trades, but master of none.” I then thought of my love of the theater and considered making a career of managing them. After doing some research, I discovered that the outlook for such a job was grim. It seemed my dream job would be gone in twenty years just like the buggy whip maker! The prediction at the time was that after 1980, there would no longer be any movie theaters.

Then one of my teachers suggested, “Since you like to read, have you considered working in a library?” The idea appealed to me so after high school I started college—after all, to work in a library or go to library school, I needed some kind of undergraduate degree. I also took all of the library science courses that I could, then went to the state university and took more library science courses. I now had courses in many areas of library science including reference service, cataloging (the old typed-on-a-card way), library administration, and children’s book selection. I was well rounded, but did not possess the coveted Master’s of Library Science degree.

I thought it would be good to work in a library first. My first job was as the Librarian of a two county regional library funded in part by the state. The two counties were in competition with each other and so the library was located in a small town as close to the center of the two counties as possible. This “library” consisted of a room primarily used to store books that were not on a bookmobile. The driver and his wife both worked in the library. The wife, in fact, had hoped to be the next librarian. Politics, power plays, I had them all! One example of this was when a prominent library board member came to visit, I was expected to drop everything for his needs. Before a year had passed I had grown tired of it. After I left they hired the driver’s wife, so she got her wish.

But I still wasn’t ready for Library School!

So I then took a job as reference librarian in a small city public library. Interestingly enough, it was after I accepted the job that they told me they really wanted someone with a MLS. At that time some libraries were beginning to experiment with computers. I felt that in order to further my career, I had to choose between library school (I did have my GRE under my belt) or computer programming. Computers won.

A year later, I was a certified computer programmer, a former reference librarian and a former head librarian. Unfortunately, knowing how to program a computer did not pave the way for either computer or library jobs, at first.

Then, in the early 70s, the library at Memphis State University, now the University of Memphis, hired a programmer to implement an automation program for the library. Since he knew nothing of libraries, they were now looking for an assistant who knew both worlds, and I fit the bill.

I have been here ever since. The person I was hired to work with was gone in 6 months and computers did not arrive until the mid-90s. My job title has changed several times, sometimes due to lateral job moves. I am now a Library Assistant III, but many people still think of me by my old title of Acquisitions Work Leader.

I don’t, as a paraprofessional, want the duties or responsibilities that the librarian positions bear, as I had already been in two “librarian” positions. On the other hand, I can answer questions and do things that do not need that level of responsibility. Some said they did not like the word “paraprofessional” because it suggested that they don’t do professional work. Most “professions” have a degree associated with them and those associates who lack the degree are

usually referred to as, guess what, “Paraprofessionals.” As a certified programmer I was considered a professional, but that did not translate into employment or money. And for all the headaches, my two “librarian” jobs did not offer any monetary rewards. Now as a “paraprofessional” I have fewer responsibilities and headaches, and of course, less money. I do get to do needed, meaningful work that includes a lot of computer time. I, in my little world, can hire students, assist in the ordering and receiving of materials answer computer problems and design and implement spreadsheets and databases.

When I came to Memphis State they offered an unaccredited MLS program that I started but in the end decided not to pursue. And today...well, I'm still not ready for library school!!

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